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THE MAN FROM GOD'S COUNTRY

BY MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE

RICHARD WEBB wished to be alone. To that end he had slipped aside from all suggestions of companionship made the night before at the club by the other newspaper men, and had come out by himself to witness the great spectacle. Just this once he desired to be completely aloof in the crowd, to draw its masked psychology about him like a cloak, unrent by any single intruding personality. He was infinitely thankful that he did not have to write about it. He was not even reporting it for his American paper, having fortunately escaped the assignment. He wondered a little restlessly, out there in the early morning air while one veil of mist after another was gradually withdrawn from the November day's serenity, how the other fellows would handle it, what reactions they would get out of it. Gibbs, of course, would do it for *The New York Times*; but, praise God, Richard Webb was not doing it at all! What he got out of it would be nobody's business but his very own. Surely even a journalist had a right to occasional reserves. He felt a trifle sorry for the other writing men in whose minds, even now, he knew descriptive phrases were beginning to come to birth, to be hastily rustled down in notebooks, and later rounded out to thinnish paragraphs. They must be busy, he thought, describing the London streets filled with the vast reverent multitude, bearing flowers in wreaths, and crosses, and simple sprays, and the still tenderness of this Armistice Day of 1920, when the body of England's Unknown Soldier—so little of humanity, and yet so much—waiting now in Victoria Station, should be escorted to its resting place in the Abbey. But as for himself, he would not cheapen the event by translating any of its emotion into newspaper phrases.

The whole idea of reporting this was so repellent to him that he wondered, a little apprehensively, if he could be suffering from

a latent attack of shell shock which had given him a sudden distaste for his chosen profession. For six years, now, he had been a reporter abroad. Ever since he came over, early in the war in the first flight of American newspaper men, his nerves tense with excitement, a belt filled with gold around his waist, and all about him on the boat crowds of singing, shouting, German reservists, he had not witnessed any of the world's great, continuous tragedy, without translating it into news. Seen now for a moment in bitter retrospect, he seemed to himself no better than an impersonal telephone transmitter, through which the agony of a disintegrating world had flowed from the center of the great disaster, across the Atlantic, to be flung in headlines upon comfortable American breakfast tables, together with the coffee cups, the finger bowls and the hot rolls. "News! News!" he thought bitterly. Great Heavens! what dragging down of a world's agony to phrase it all in newspaper columns! And how very tired he was of *words*! Well at least this burial of England's Unknown Soldier should receive the tribute of his utter silence. That was the deepest that he could offer, and he must give the best that was in him now for he was there to attend in all solemnity the funeral of a man he had known; a man for whose death he felt poignantly responsible, and for whom he had cared, although he had only seen him once. No, that was not true, he had seen him thousands upon thousands of times! But that one especial meeting had been a summing up of all the rest, had made him the type for all the others.

It happened back in 1916, before America was in. Just by chance they two, Webb and the unknown soldier, had been flung together for a few chaotic moments in a wild maelstrom of mud and curses and marching men. The soldier was going up to the front, and Webb was as near the front as reporters were allowed—indeed considerably nearer. He was a private in an English regiment, had been sent ahead with a message, and was waiting by the side of the road for his company to overtake him. Webb was there too, watching the great spectacle and thinking it into words. He had not noticed the boy—really he was no more—until he turned suddenly, looked at him appraisingly, and said, "You're from God's Country, aren't you?"

"America? Yes." Webb nodded back.

"So am I," the boy said eagerly, and Webb could almost have laughed, for the moment he spoke, in spite of his uniform, his nationality was so unmistakable. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, looking into the young, eager face before him.

"Oh, one of you writing fellows brought me over, a man named Webb—Richard Webb—writes bully war stuff. You're a reporter, too, aren't you? Do you know him?"

Webb's heart gave a lurch, and for an instant he did not answer. There was something in the eager eyes that terrified him. It was with an effort that he said, "I am Richard Webb."

"You," cried the other, "*You!* Good Lord, I never thought I'd have the luck to see you!" And by the sudden tribute of his face Webb perceived that he was a being set apart. "It was your stuff brought me over," the boy said, simply.

"Mine? Good God!" Webb exclaimed under his breath. He had a panicky desire to turn tail and escape, as though something tremendous and sacred were coming too intimately close to him.

"Yes," the other rushed on, "there were some especial articles, early in 1915—remember them?" (Oh, yes, Webb remembered them well! It gave him a revulsion of feeling now to think of them.) "Well, they turned the trick for me. They showed me where a man ought to be—at least where *I* ought to be—but I never thought I'd have the luck to tell you so, and—and to thank you." He broke off, flushing, too embarrassed to say more, but the consecration of his face was enough.

"*Thank* me!" Webb cried. "To curse me, you mean!" He looked about at the sordid press and confusion of men, the dreadful mud, a rotting horse by the roadside, and death, he knew, on ahead. The boy looked at it too. "I know," he said, "but it's where I belong." And again illumination shot through all his pride and shyness. "Here's my company," he added. "So long!" With a grin of farewell that did not conceal his emotion, he was gone, swallowed back into his unit, and marching away to death. For of course he had been killed, Webb told himself. So very few came back alive from that slaughter. And he was responsible for his death. What right had he to spread a net of golden words to entrap eager young souls like

that! It was hard to say exactly why—for they had had so little talk together—but for some reason this boy had stood to Webb as the type of all that generous and glorious youth that the nations had offered at its flood tide, and that the red god of war had drunk to the lees. Of course he had seen it over and over again. He had been at Gallipoli, and had heard that terrible cheering of the young men as they sailed forth to attempt the landing, which meant to most of them almost certain death, although he had not known how to translate it into undying phrases as Masfield had. There was something, he told himself, in the heart of youth that could always be inflamed, made drunk by the call of death and glory. Good God, how he had played upon it! What right had he or any of them so to entrap the youth of the world? Today he was there to offer an atonement, and to pay tribute to that unknown, his fellow countryman, the man whom he had brought over. He knew it was an impertinence to think of England's soldier as an American, but he did not really think of him as such. He belonged to a larger nationality. To youth, to glory, to idealism. He himself had said that he came from God's Country, and probably, Webb thought, letting it go at that, that was indeed the country from which he came. No matter from what part of the known globe such eager souls hailed, they were all natives of that one land. So it was the man from God's Country that they were burying today, and it was Richard Webb who had led him to his death.

But it seemed after all that Webb was not to be alone. He had been standing there some time, feeling the tense expectancy of the people all about him, when suddenly the lady appeared.

Where she came from, how she got there, was one of those mysteries of chance never to be solved. She was real enough in herself, yet she seemed to be so an epitome of all that England had suffered that one almost thought of her as having been distilled out of the hidden sorrow of the crowd. She must have slipped through the press of people at a corner of the street, and come walking down the empty thoroughfare, yet her appearance before Webb, who had been thinking unseeingly back to the eager expression in the eyes of the man from God's Country, was so startling and unexpected as to seem almost as though a

curtain had been withdrawn and a being had stepped through from the other world. He became aware of her, first, when a flapper near him giggled irrepressibly, and said, "Well, how did *she* break out?" And an older girl beside her said, "Shut up!" fiercely. Then Webb looked and the lady was standing in the street before him, a transparent wisp of humanity. Curiously enough he was conscious, first of all, of the appealing look of confusion and distress in her childlike eyes, rather than how strange she was. Her hair, which was silvery white, was uncovered and shining in the November sun. A dark cloak hung from her shoulders, disclosing a low cut evening dress of delft blue, whose gentle festivity, even Webb could see, belonged to pre-war days. In her hands she carried the white chrysanthemums that so many bore that day, but on her feet were fantastic red-tasseled bedroom slippers.

She was protesting anxiously to a perturbed policeman. "No, no," she said, in a breathless, distressed little voice. "I cannot go home—I must be here. He would not like it—it would be *dreadful* if I were not here. No, they do not know I have come—I had to slip away from them. They would not understand, though I explained it to them over and over. But I *had* to come. You see," she said, speaking with a gentle finality, as she looked up into the policeman's face, "I am his Mother."

The officer's big face flushed all over at that, and he looked more unhappy than ever. It was at this point that she raised her eyes and caught sight of Webb. What there was in his expression to reassure her he never knew, but instantly her small face cleared. "You understand," she said, with complete confidence; and prompted by he knew not what Webb returned simply, "Yes, of course, I understand. It's all right, officer," he said, "the lady is with me."

The policeman was relieved. "Well let me know if there's any trouble," he whispered, and holding up the rope let her slip beneath it, and the crowd, straining respectfully back, made a little space for her beside Webb.

"I—I am glad I found you," she said, slipping her hand through his arm, "you are so like Tim."

"Tim?" he asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "He was my youngest brother, such a dear—but he was killed like all the rest."

But it was not about Tim she talked; it was about her only son who was being buried in the Abbey that day. She seemed quite sure that Webb knew all about him, and about his tastes. "He will like today," she said, "you remember how he loved November? He will be glad to come home on a day like this." But it was not of November days that she spoke most, it was of the spring; the spring when boys come home from school for their holidays. Most especially she spoke of the fresh sound of water running in late April. There must have been something very memorable and happy about the way the water—particularly one brook she knew—ran in spring, because, poor lady, she told Webb over and over about it, her stumbling thoughts constantly tripped up by its recollection. She appeared to realize this, for every now and again she caught herself doing it, and apologized in a little frightened way as though she had been scolded for it. Webb gathered that "they" hadn't liked her to do it. It seemed that as long as she could not forget about the water some one had to stay with her. "But how can I forget," she appealed, "when the sound of it runs in my head all the time, and here too?" she said, and touched her breast. "I might get it out of my head, but it will always be in my heart."

Whatever joys were connected with the brook in spring, they seemed to have been very simple and everyday, just the cozy happinesses that a boy and his mother might have together out of doors. She dwelt so persistently on those old days that she seemed in her tragic person to bring England's happy years before 1914 straying back into the present, shattered by the agony of the war and confused by all the shifting changes of the times. She talked disjointedly in a continuous murmur, necessitating no reply from Webb, and so low that it did not break the pall of silence that was over the crowd. Once she touched the folds of her blue dress. "He liked it," she explained. "It was new just before the war. We had it for best all that spring. I promised to wear it when he came home. It—it isn't quite right for the morning," she faltered, "but I promised him, and so I must wear it."

But the day's amazements were not over for Webb. As they waited there in the softly clearing sunlight, the great mass of people all about them, the Foot Guards lining the streets on either side now, and in the distance the tall, flag covered cenotaph, there was a stir in the crowd and a man came pushing his way through.

"Webb!" he said, breathlessly, "Richard Webb!"

Webb looked at him uncertainly. He was a man with one arm, gray hair and lined face.

"You wouldn't remember me," he said, "but I saw you once in the great push. It was what you wrote put me there—remember?"

"*You?*" cried Webb, "Why, why," he stammered under his breath, "I thought you were dead."

"No, what's left of me is still alive."

They spoke in hurried whispers out of deference to the deep silence of the crowd.

"I thought it was you they were burying today in the Abbey," Webb said.

"*Me?*" cried the man, "Great Heavens, no! It's a better man than I. It was the best ones they killed. But yes," he went on in a moment, "a part of me is dead, so perhaps they are burying it today."

"Which part?" Webb questioned.

"Oh, you know. The part you brought over with your fine words."

Webb winced away from the bitter disillusionment of the eyes bent on him—eyes that had been so clear and eager when he had seen them before. "Forgive me," he said helplessly.

"Oh, I forgive you all right," the man retorted grimly; "only," he burst out in a sudden passion, "for God's sake, next time, give us something better than war to die for!" The outbreak seemed to unlock the bitterness of his soul, and it gushed forth in fierce, disjointed whispers. "Preach danger to us, and hardship, and something big to die for, and you'll always get us, always get the young men—only, for heaven's sake, don't set us to killing one another again. Mind," he rushed on, "I think our side was right, and if it had to be I was glad I was in it—only why in

God's name didn't some of you wise ones see it coming, and dig in to resist it years ago? *We* didn't know. How should we—that's not our job. We only follow a good lead. We're always there, I tell you, red hot and ready for anything big. We're straining on the collar, and always ready, and then suddenly some of the big ones go crazy, and slip the leash, and in an instant we're at one another's throats, killing each other for a big idea—*killing* each other! God, what a damned waste! There it is, I tell you, all the red hot youth and idealism of the world, always there—a flame in the heart—always to be called on! But they *never* call on it for anything but war! Oh, can't you give us something better than that to die for?"

"What is its moral equivalent?" Webb asked uncertainly, stunned by the indictment from the heart of embittered youth.

"Lord, *I* don't know," the other retorted angrily. "That isn't for us to know. It's for you writing chaps to find out. We only follow a good lead, I tell you. Only," he whispered savagely, "think twice before you incite us again with the intoxication of words. Oh, you think the war's over and the world—what's left of it—safe now—I tell you it's *never* safe! Something will happen again, and in a second, before you realize it, you'll have us at one another's throats once more. Oh, I'm safe enough now!" he glanced at his empty sleeve, "but there are always more of us! Great God, you could do *anything* with us—move mountains, turn the world over, make a new heaven and a new earth—but all you ever do is to set us to murdering one another. Oh, for God's sake—for *Christ's* sake, preach us something better than war! We're so easy to be had—the flutter of a flag, drums beating, fine words—and we're off. Oh, I was young once; don't I know?"

"How old are you now?" Webb asked.

"Twenty-five," the man returned bitterly.

Webb was silent for a space. "I always thought of you as the man from God's Country," he said at length.

The other stared at him. "You didn't mean America?" he questioned.

"No; the land of youth, of faith, of glorious sacrifice."

"Well, I don't belong to that country any longer."

Webb looked at the lined face and the hair that was gray now, but had been bright gold. "Well," he said at length, "anyway it's a man from there they're burying today."

"Oh, God, yes!" the other cried under his breath. "It must be! They couldn't fail to pick one of them—there were so many, they died in shoals everywhere."

Suddenly the lady who had been standing silent reached across Webb, and touched the new comer, lightly, with her transparent fingers.

"I am glad you are here today," she said softly, her blue eyes raised to his.

The American had not noticed her before, but now he turned upon her a startled, comprehensive glance.

"It is this lady's son that they are bringing home today," Webb explained gravely.

The other's face flushed darkly all over, and he pressed his lips tight together. "I understand," he got out at length, and slipping behind Webb, he wedged his way through the crowd, and came to stand by the lady on the other side. "I knew your son very well, Madam," he said. "It was a great privilege."

He did not touch her, but bent down to her, very tender and reverent, his head uncovered.

"Yes," she answered, responding to his homage with a gentle graciousness, "I am sure you did. I know it is only his friends who are here today." She looked around for a moment on all the vast packed crowd of people. "He had very many friends," she said. "Many more than I knew. Indeed," she confessed piteously, looking confusion, "of all these friends of his you two are the only ones I seem to know."

The man spoke to her quickly, reassuringly. "But you do know us," he said, "so it is all right, and all these other people are his friends, and of course yours as well. They do not actually recognize you, perhaps, but they know you must be somewhere here, and all their hearts are with you."

Her face cleared gratefully. "Yes, of course," she said. "I had forgotten."

After that she began, in her gentle murmur, to tell him all over as she had told Webb about her son; about his youth and

most especially about the beautiful fresh sound of water running in the spring. She had a confused way of calling it the resurrection sound.

The morning had worn on; the streets were a sea of waiting people. The mists were gone now, and even the air and the sunshine seemed to partake of the utter stillness. But suddenly the silence was cut by the boom of a minute gun. Webb felt the little woman's body stiffen against him, and as the gun went on, minute by minute, a slow deep pulse of expectancy, he was conscious of her hands upon his arm in an agony of waiting. Then at last, far away, the air began to weave itself to rhythm. The Life Guards in front of them, with one solemn gesture, rippling along the whole line, reversed arms, and bent their heads over the stocks of their guns; and now one began to hear the drums rolling out the Dead March in the distance, and the skirl of the pipes. Far down the street men were taking off their hats, and here and there a handkerchief fluttered. The lady began to shake. "I mustn't cry," she whispered desperately.

Webb could not steady her. He did not know what he might do when those dark suffocating drums, beating out the sorrow of the world, came opposite. Again it was the other who reassured her.

"You will not cry," he whispered. "You will be too proud for tears. Your son has saved England, and all of England is here to pay him tribute."

She nodded swiftly back at that, her small face quivering, and her body bracing itself.

So they waited, the two Americans standing beside her in an utter reverence. The procession was very close now. First came the mounted policemen, then four regiments of Foot Guards, and now the pipes and drums—every drum encased in black—were passing with their terrible, heart-throbbing music. Followed a little pause of empty space, and then the gun carriage with its burden. On the casket lay the simple belt and helmet of a private soldier, and on either side of the carriage marched twelve pall bearers, Admirals, Generals, and Sir Hugh Trenchard, the first Air Marshal; representatives of all of England's high command from the land, the sea, and the sky.

With a quick gesture the lady had slipped out of her cloak, letting it fall darkly about her feet, standing forth in her blue dress, the sun upon her hair and bare arms, and the white chrysanthemums that she bore held close against her breast. As the cloak had dropped from her shoulders, so, almost, her body appeared as well to have fallen away leaving only her spirit there. She stood without a quiver, all her being gathered up in one intense look, fastened upon the flag covered casket. As he passed she spoke softly to her son. "Christopher—Kit! My dear, my dear," she whispered, all of England's pride and grief gathered in her one person.

It passed, and with the rolling drums, the pipers, and the solemn marching men, went on to the cenotaph. Here a figure came forth to meet it bearing a wreath, and someone in the crowd whispered, "The King."

The flowers had fallen from the lady's fingers, her body was still beside Webb, but she herself was there with her son at the foot of the cenotaph. Suddenly she spoke, "It is the King's son who is dead," she said, her own loss swept away in the revelation of the nation's grief. But in a moment she spoke again out of complete conviction. "No! The Son of Man—it is the Son of Man who is dead for all the sins of the world."

As she said the words a woman somewhere in the crowd screamed sharply and fell into deep sobbing.

The first strokes of the hour sounded from Big Ben. Every hand was raised in salute. The King pressed a button and the flags fell away from the cenotaph, leaving it stark and white to the gaze. Silence then, utter and complete. Silence over the waiting crowd, over all the city, and throughout the country. Silence, it seemed to Webb, over all the world, while the whole of humanity fastened the eyes of the heart upon that sacrificial altar whereon the spirit of youth had been offered for the sins of the nations.

Silence . . . then the bugles blowing the Last Post.

MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE.